

Islam in Western Europe: Religiosity as a Deliberative Process

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Overview

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Western Europe opened the gate for cheap and unqualified labor force to rebuild and sustain its economies. For geographical and historical reasons, this immigration was provided by underdeveloped Muslim countries. It brought a capital gain to Western European economies although it became a complex social and urban phenomenon as well. As a matter of fact, a human settlement in a given social context creates social and cultural problems that necessitate adapted social policies. The situation turned out to be radically alarming for Western European societies because of the protests of the third generation. The social gap within Western European societies, as a result of liberal and neo-liberal policies, seems unbridgeable. Gradually, the social character of the problem of Muslim communities is "veiled" by Media, right wing politicians, experts, imams, islamists and veiled young women. In other words, we are witnessing an "islamization" of a social conflict as Middle classes in Western Europe are going through a serious social downgrading and see immigration as a social stress.

Social research and surveys show that what many take as granted (that is Islam is the primary identity marker of these social groups) can hardly be confirmed. In fact, religiosity cannot be separated from dynamics of ethnicity, culture, language, or region. In Western European major cities, all these factors converge to make the identity of immigrant Muslim communities from southern countries (mainly from Turkey, North and West Africa, or South Asia) a multifaceted one. These immigrants settled down either as individuals, families or even as members of an entire village coming together. Therefore, family and village of origin, with its complex social networks, is the most fundamental element of their identity. Let us also be aware that these groups do not claim Islam as their prior and exclusive identity marker. They affirm to be Muslims as long as French autochthones assert to be Christian or Jewish (in the case of France) and similarly, if a French declares to be French, the immigrant declares himself as an Algerian (in the case of an Algerian).

In Western Europe, religion and nationality are relational identity markers that depend on the context of identification. In certain circumstances, primary identity markers of immigrants stick to a certain village (in a given region). In a given context, speaking a certain language and belonging to a certain ethnicity (Black, south Asian, Turk, Arab, Berber, Kurd...) sharply distinguishes individuals within Muslim communities. In point of fact, these features cannot be easily detected for a superficial observer. Thus, Islam in the Western European context should be understood as a mixed set of orthodox/popular rituals practiced by a given community of a given origin. It is true that Islam is a highly polarizing

religion, aiming at structuring the life of individuals and groups according to a covenant, nevertheless, this dynamic of polarization is counterbalanced by a strong dynamic of fragmentation. Both sorts of dynamics are intrinsic to the agency of these immigrant social groups. In their everyday life, they practice and embody Islam in a synthetic and fragmented way.

That being the case, the presence of Muslims in Western Europe, is a socio-cultural phenomenon involving highly fragmented and heterogeneous groups that belong to different intertwining identities, where Islam is a polarizing element. Further fragmentation can be observed due to the fact that these communities are highly mobile. They move constantly between cities within a given country, between European cities, between European countries and their countries of origin. As a result of continuous brain draining, waves of refugees and family reunification, new members come to join the communities. The newcomers adapt themselves to the communities and at the same time they transform them in many respects.

As has been highlighted by the recent debate over the integral veil (*niqāb/burqa*) in France and Belgium, Muslim immigrant communities endorse different legal interpretations of provisions and religious practices. By the same token, it was an occasion for many observers and analysts to notice a fragmented religiosity among Muslims with regard to dressing (supposed to be a domain of Islamic law in the Muslim perspective). That fragmentation was the main characteristic of religiosity among Muslims in Western Europe, has been a known fact for scholars decades ago.¹ The fragmentation of the Muslim religious field does not mean only a diversity of symbols, customs or rites. Rather, it pinpoints to a "fragmentation of authority with a diffused loci of religious authority that offer authoritative guidance".² Taking into account this definition, the fragmentation of the Muslim religious field in Western Europe is due to two dynamics. On the one hand, it is an effect of a social fragmentation since Muslim immigrant communities are organized around families which immigrated to Europe with their different cultural heritages. On the other hand, in respect to legal opinions, it is a result of a plurality of religious authorities.

Increasingly, as has been noted by M. Q. Zaman, "many religious authorities have come themselves to explicitly recognize the fragmentation of their authority".³ Granted that in the public space, legal pluralism is recognized by religious authorities, one could speak of a *deliberative religiosity*. I mean by this controversial religious practices which become part of the public debate and subject of the admitted difference of "authorized" interpretations.⁴ I subscribe, here, to deliberative religiosity as framed by Robert Justin Lipkin, who

¹ Salvatore, Armando, "Authority in Question: Secularity, Republicanism and 'Communitarianism' in the Emerging Euro-Islamic Public Sphere", *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2007, p. 146.

² Zaman, Muhammad Qasim, "Consensus and Religious Authority in Modern Islam: The Discourses of the 'Ulamā", in: *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, Eds. Gudrun Krämer, Sabine Schmidtke, Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006, p. 175.

³ Zaman, Muhammad Qasim, *Op. cit.*, p. 176.

⁴ Jean-Paul Charnay has described this pluralistic Muslim legal process as being "une recherche entre diverses solutions pour découvrir la plus adéquate au cas concret envisagé. Elle permet aussi la lutte dialectique des prétentions opposées qui s'affrontent au cours du litige." See :

Charnay, Jean-Paul, "Pluralisme normatif et ambigüité dans le *Fiqh*", *Studia Islamica*, No. 19, 1963, p. 78.

understands it as a “non-fundamentalist religious argument that plays a full role in the public square”.⁵

I

Since their formation, Muslim communities endure an unavoidable secularization. Within the walls of the suburbs, these communities fall, unwillingly, into negative dynamics of reproduction and communitarianism. Inasmuch as it is an urban phenomenon, immigration became a field of opportunities for political parties and especially for socialist/leftist tendencies that mostly get their electorate in lower class suburbs. In the so-called “Glorious Thirty” (1945–1975), the political landscape of Western Europe was largely dominated by left wing parties. As a result, immigrants benefited from several social programs that improved their conditions of health, employment and accommodation. Though left wing parties maintained a long-standing political communication with these groups, it was activated only during electoral periods as a bargain. In everyday life, politicians were not paying much attention to the social development of the suburbs.

Facing an increasing economic crisis since the eighties, the right wing parties adopted policies of marginalization and exclusion with regard to the descendents of immigrants. This leads to concerns of security and radicalism. Instead of handling the causes, right wing discourse and policies focus on anxieties and consequences. First, criminality is a social consequence of misery, isolation and absence of social policies, like in any urban center all over the world. Second, in Western European suburbs, radical Islamism is appealing to few people.

Neither right wing nor left wing parties came to represent Muslim communities in Western European democracies. Talal Asad finds the reason of this failure in the following:

“The ideology of political representation in liberal democracies makes it difficult if not impossible to represent Muslims as Muslims because in theory the citizens who constitute a democratic state belong to a class that is defined only by what is common to all its members and its members only. What is common is the abstract equality of individual citizens to one another, so that each counts as one”.⁶

Though it would be unfair to judge the line of reasoning of Asad by the above quoted passage, I challenge it with regard to two aspects. On the one hand, most Muslims belong, politically and socially speaking, to lower classes whose interests are, traditionally, represented by left wing parties. On the other, political parties in liberal democracies do not represent individuals but rather class interests according to specific cleavages. In my view, the reason why Muslims were not represented in the first generation is that most of them were not nationals and therefore they did not vote. Further, immigrants of the same

⁵ Lipkin, Robert Justin, “Reconstructing the Public Square”, *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol. 24, No. 5, 2003, pp. 2082-2086.

⁶ Asad, Talal, “Muslims as a “Religious Minority” in Europe, in Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 173.

generation do not possess any political culture allowing them to have a political vision or to understand their new realities.

Due to their access to education, many members of the second generation took part in local social and cultural associations to help their communities understand laws and opportunities allowed by Western European societies. These associations developed into unions and organizations, and started to attract the political concern of their countries of origin. The latter tried to take advantage from such a prospect in exchange for funding mosques and Islamic centers. In particular, North African states and Turkey were attentive to prevent the development of any political opposition against their regimes. Gulf States, a major provider of funds, accepted to fund only those religious projects that were cautioned by conservative religious authorities that were active (or studied) in the Gulf countries. To be recommended by such authorities, one has to be a conservative Muslim. Therefore, many among the fund hunters understood the chance behind being conservative and took it.

II

The lack of political representation of Muslim communities was noticed by the first waves of islamists who came to Europe as political refugees fleeing the oppression of Arab nationalist regimes. Islamists were able to achieve some gain, setting up several Islamic centers and small mosques that played the role of social framing and spiritual guidance. At the same time, they failed to have power over the communities the way they aspired to. In their countries of origin, most of the islamists belong to lower urban middle classes, they are educated and have a clear radical political vision. Conversely, Muslims immigrants come from rural groups that are not educated and are attached to their home countries where they spend their summer holidays, uphold social ties and own real estate. To secure new earned capital, they were not keen to be instrumentalized in a confrontation with their countries. Accordingly, these communities were not open for a political Islam as presented by the islamists. They wanted an Islam which connects them to what they know the best: their homes that are reassuring. To find alternative "religious authorities", the Muslim communities of Western Europe started importing imams from the rural areas they came from. The imported imams are, naturally, educated in a traditional way, without absolutely any knowledge of European languages or any urban culture or whatever that can be helpful in understanding the European context.

Consequently, these imams failed in helping the Muslim communities understanding the social code of Western European societies. For instance, the imported imam of Vénissieux (Lyon-France) did not know that in Europe, it was a crime for a husband to beat his wife. When asked about violence against women he said that according to the Qur'ān a husband can beat his wife in certain cases. Unsurprisingly, he was expelled, in April 2004, from France to Algeria after 25 years of "service", leaving behind his 16 children.⁷ It is not only French authorities who cannot cope with such anachronistic reading of a religious text, but also the younger generations within these immigrant communities. First, because there is a crack between rural imams and the European education the younger generations received.

⁷ See: Cesari, Jocelyne, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 158.

Second, the latter face real and daily social challenges that imported imams cannot handle in light of their traditional religious knowledge.

Divided between two cultures, younger generations of Muslims, who were already born in Western Europe and who speak European languages as their native languages, are no more at ease in this ambiguous condition. Within their families and suburbs they live the contradictions of a hollow identity in a fuzzy context. Religiosity and social dynamics interact to make the Muslim presence in Western Europe the composite problem it is. In this regard, since September 1989, in the media and the public debate, Islam became the central identity marker of immigration in Western Europe. This was the case when the question of wearing the headscarf in schools developed into a public issue after banning three veiled young women from school in France (known as *L'affaire de Creil*). This was, to a certain extent, the act of birth of the affirmative third generation. From the standpoint of the French right wing, these veiled girls brought a medieval practice to their schools (and societies) which differentiates between them and other pupils on a religious basis. Furthermore, the French right wing argued that the veil deforms the public landscape, endangers women rights and prevents them from assimilation. In other words, right wing discourse requires the veiled girls to hide social differentiation by cultural assimilation. From the point of view of the veiled girls, and their communities, the veil is part of the Muslim law and as Muslims they are required to respect it.

III

In order to understand the significance of the headscarf in the public debate on the issue of Muslim presence in Western Europe, it is necessary here to rethink about the visibility/invisibility link. Women wore the veil, even the integral veil, since the first generation. However, women of the first and second generations were not seen or noticed when they wore the veil. The places they attended were mostly markets, hospitals and parks. They were invisible as long as they were marginal social agents. In any case, these women were not asking for a right to the social resources as, in most of the cases, they were housewives. For the first generation, wearing the veil was unquestionable since, coming from rural areas of their countries of origin, they always did so. For them, it had the meaning of a custom rather than a religious sign that distinguishes them from other women. In the case of the second generation, the veil became one of the subjects of generational conflicts. Usually, girls resist but accept, under pressure, the imposition of the veil by their parents. For these women, the veil was a cultural sign of their exclusion from public space. Though they wished emancipation, they could not afford the price of leaving their communities which, put in its social context, is a risk that most of them did not dare to take.

Within the Muslim communities, the feminine condition revealed all contradictions of patriarchal families. Thus, while parents urged their daughters to enroll in schools in order to be educated, they were preparing them for marriage at an early age (as they always did in the rural areas). On the other hand, education taught second generation girls equality of genders and women rights. Unable to be in command of the situation, parents often sought the help of the imams in mosques and Islamic centers to accommodate girls. At a moment in secondary school years, parents decide to withdraw girls from school once they make a marriage agreement. After marriage, these women became almost inaccessible for social

help. They took on, willingly or unwillingly, a baby boom that further complicated the social condition of their communities.

That being the case, when the headmaster of the Gabriel-Havez Middle School in Creil excluded three young women on September 18th, 1989, the veil was already a reality in the schools since decades. What changed was that among 876 pupils in Gabriel-Havez school, 500 were Muslims. The young women were *expelled* "on the grounds that the scarves infringed on the *laïcité* and neutrality of the public school".⁸ Indeed, the visibility of these young women by the means of the veil was a sign of unease in the French society. It pointed out contradictions of both their communities and those of the French society. The veil and secularism were used as arms in a social battlefield. Symbols are important and effective, especially cultural symbols as they allow to abstract, to manipulate and to cover the social conflict. After a long run debate, where the right wing parties were pressing for the interdiction of the veil and the left wing was resisting, a law was issued in 2004 forbidding any visible sign of religious affiliation. More importantly, this debate allowed Muslims to be part of the public space, media and intellectual controversy.

In the 1990s, the question for Western Europeans was not how to "best ensure the successful incorporation of Muslims into the values of a liberal democracy" as some argue.⁹ On matters of gender, Islam shared the same Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices fashioned in an Arabian context. The position with regard to women and their condition is sufficiently well known to the European public from the Judeo-Christian treatment of women through the medieval and modern European history. It is a position that subordinates women to a patriarchal moral and social order. Emancipation of women in Western Europe was the result of secularism that broke the above mentioned order. If that is the case, the exclusion of veiled girls from schools is a counter-effect of secularism.

Be that as it may, the debate over the headscarf allowed the inclusion of Muslims, and especially of Muslim women into the public deliberation. If we take the latter in the meaning of voting, campaigning, letter-writing, pamphleteering¹⁰..., then Muslim women largely responded to the conditions of political deliberation. As for the outcomes, one must admit that deliberation over the veil did not achieve consensus. At least, it showed the capacity of Western European societies for inclusiveness of the Muslim minorities. In this respect, L. Swaine noted that:

"Muslims seem to be fully able to take part in democratic deliberation, and that they violate no commandments of their faith by so doing"¹¹... "Muslim minorities support liberty of conscience and religious liberty for all...via respectful argumentation and reasoning in public *fora* and also through the examples that they set in public and private life, in their interactions with others".¹²

⁸ Bowen, John Richard, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 83.

⁹ Swaine, Lucas, "Demanding Deliberation: Political Liberalism and the Inclusion of Islam", *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2009, p. 93.

¹⁰ Swaine, L., *Op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Similarly, A. March compares many Islamic thinkers to theorists of discourse and deliberation who “reject an antagonistic, conflictual, zero-sum form of *da'wa* and debate in favor of something more collaborative and open-minded”.¹³ With reference to women’s dress, there is a divergence over understanding texts and customs among Muslim minorities. One also has to be aware of the fact that even if we were able to identify *x* family as following *y* doctrine of Islam, this does not imply, in any case, that the third generation is respecting what their families do. Religiosity gets, necessarily, influenced by education, generational conflicts and social conditions. On the ground, the majority of third generation individuals, as showed by sociological studies, do not practice Islam. A recent study shows that only 33% declare to be believing and practicing Islam.¹⁴

Being exposed to different Islamic interpretations, the third generation has access, in free societies, to an open market of Islamic interpretations. Fragmentation goes exponentially and imams, all categories, find it hard to communicate with and keep the third generation under control. With regard to the veil, it is to be noted that it is a practice that concerns only a minority of women (8% of women under the age of 35 wear it regularly).¹⁵ What seems to be striking among the third generation young women is that they develop an increasing inclination to argue and to protest for their rights to put the veil in the public space.

To face growing protest, right wing politicians and ideologues banned the integral veil, using two main arguments: security and dignity. Such a line of reasoning, obviously, replaces the argument of secularism. First, they argue that the veil is, chiefly, an obstacle of visibility and therefore a probable threat to public order. Second, taking into account the dignity of women it is not acceptable that a woman is “hidden” in a similar manner. While such a discourse has some truth in it, it should be said that, it covers the face of the problem as well. The partisans of banning visible religious signs reveal the intense contradictions of Western European societies. On the one hand, secularism is not recalled by the integral veil antagonists in the discussion since it does not concern the way people should dress in public places. On the other hand, laws that ban the integral veil in public places do not specify whose security they are protecting, presumably not that of the people living in the suburbs.

In practice, then, the veil is pushed to stay behind the wall while it is meant to be a rejection of the wall. Both wearing the veil and banning it strengthen the leaps between the suburbs and Western European societies. What many Western Europeans do not want to see is the very reality of these young women who turn out to be, provocatively, visible by wearing the veil. Indeed, in the behavior of third generation young women, there is a marked sense of injustice that they displaced into a headscarf. I would not agree to make a comparison, like Anver Emon did, between the immigrant Muslim woman in France and the *dhimmi* in Islamic law, but he is not wide of the mark when he sees in the immigrant Muslim woman “the challenge of accommodating minorities amidst a universal, albeit

¹³ March, Andrew F., *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: the Search for an Overlapping Consensus*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 225.

¹⁴ Fourquet, Jérôme, *Enquête sur l’implantation et l’évolution de l’Islam de France 1989-2009*, IFOP, Paris, Août 2009, p. 7.

¹⁵ Fourquet, Jérôme, *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

ambiguous, claim of French core values".¹⁶ Interestingly enough, Muslim women and their defenders used the argument of secularism of Western European societies to claim neutrality of state with regard to their dress. That being the case, one can assert that, regardless of the outcome of deliberation, Muslim minorities came to discuss a legal matter (in Islamic law) with non-Islamic opponents, in a non-Islamic public space with arguments that they borrowed from the same space. Likewise, recent researches on public intervention of British Muslims with reference to 9/11 show how Muslims manage to access the British "dialogical network". They did so by expressing their reaction in the same or similar utterances of "a performative discourse that inscribes them in the inclusive category of those who condemn the terrorist attacks".¹⁷

At any rate, let us not forget that the veil is a sign of a complex religiosity practiced in a given social environment. It is a part of a religious *subculture*: Muslim food, Muslim dress, Muslim music...etc. In short, Muslim subculture of suburbs synthesizes whatever is meant to be a sign of distinction and protest against the Western "culture". Recently, A. Caeiro argued for "a complex deliberative process that underlies the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR)".¹⁸ Further, he described the project of ECFR as being an attempt at "imaging an Islamic counter-public".¹⁹ To be precise, ECFR, an organ of jurists that claim to represent Muslim legal authorities in Western Europe, takes on shaping an imagined Islamic counter-public. However, ECFR has to accept its extremely limited role in the European Muslim religious field let alone determining the counter-public of Muslim immigrant communities. My claim is that a given subculture (in our case it is a double subculture nourished by both Western and Islamic elements) always develops as a counterculture of a given social group that contests the dominant culture. The latter does not accept offending its norms and wants uniformity. Subcultures find, at the end, their place as part of the dominant culture only when social integration is achieved.

¹⁶ Emon, Anver M., "Pluralizing Religion: Islamic Law and the Anxiety of Reasoned Deliberation", In: *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, Eds. Courtney Bender, Pamela E. Klassen, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, p. 75.

¹⁷ Ferrié, J.-N., Dupret, B., Legrand, V., "Comprendre la délibération parlementaire: une approche praxéologique de la politique en action", *Revue française de science politique*, Vol. 58, No. 5, 2008, p. 810.

¹⁸ Caeiro, Alexandre, "The Power of European Fatwas: the Minority *Fiqh* project and the making of an Islamic Counterpublic", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 2010, p. 435.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

Conclusion

In this article, I tried to briefly show that dynamics of fragmentation and secularism intervene, effectively, in shaping the Muslim religious field in Western Europe. As a result, authorities are atomized which allows a divergence of religious standpoints and a multiplicity of voices over religious questions. Subsequently, I highlighted the social character of Muslim communities' participation in the public space through the example of the headscarf debate. The latter also illustrates the deliberative assets, so to speak, of Muslim authorities and individuals in negotiating their integration with Western European societies.

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